



Custom Railings

Mixing and matching components opens up a world of design possibilities

by Matt Breyer

My company often works with homeowners who have been in their house for years and are in the market for more than just a basic deck. I typically start by asking them for their ideas, preferences, and goals; then I look for creative and less-traditional solutions to build a backyard destination that is just right for them. More often than not, I end up designing custom railings for these clients.

For the sake of discussion, I define a custom rail as anything that doesn't come in a box with a set of instructions. It could be a rail that's custom-made to

our specs by a manufacturer, or one that's created on site using a mixture of standard rail components and raw materials. We build enough custom rails that we've developed relationships with several local metal fabricators, a vinyl-railing manufacturer, and a few glass shops, and we continue to seek out additional relationships.

Being successful in this business often comes down to the small details — including a unique option a competitor hasn't thought of — that swing a job your way. In this article, I talk about a few custom options I've installed and why I

chose to use them. There is no single solution to rail needs, however, because each client is different and material options are constantly evolving.

Be sure to think about the long-term safety of your clients; stepping away from the instructions in the box brings liability and a responsibility to ensure that the rails are not just attractive but will hold your clients and their guests securely on the deck.

Preserving the View

Many of my clients want a railing that doesn't obstruct the view. Cable rails are a good option for this, but they aren't popular in my area; I think they make an architectural statement that just doesn't resonate here. I have found that using glass balusters or panels can accomplish the same end — in a dramatic fashion. Glass can be integrated into wood, metal, and many composite railings (1). Some



Custom Touches on a Budget

A good wrought-iron shop can create almost any design or style of metal railing for a client with aristocratic taste, but the cost can easily exceed several hundred dollars per linear foot. Instead, I might incorporate an accent panel (left) into a simpler railing to provide some of the same effect for a lower price.

Preserving the View

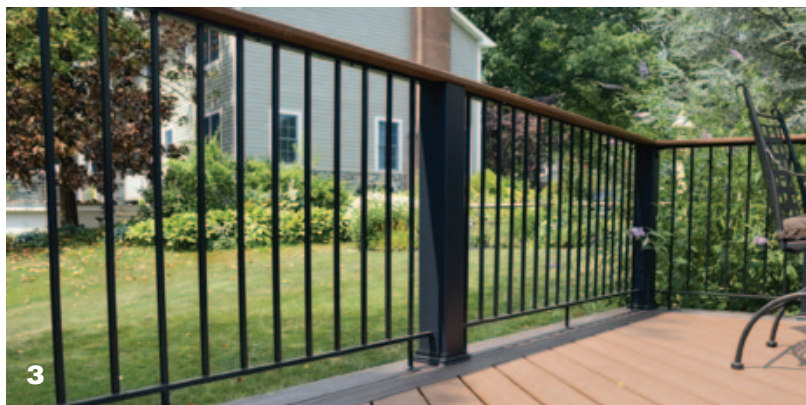


- (1) Glass railings preserve views but require cleaning.
- (2) Black metal balusters fade into the background and are relatively unobtrusive.
- (3) Wide newels give this low-profile metal railing a more substantial look.
- (4) Attach a deck board to a low-profile metal railing as a cap to give the owners and their guests a surface to put cups and other items on.

vinyl- and composite-railing manufacturers have even begun to offer glass as an option.

But glass does need to be cleaned, which discourages some clients from choosing it. I've also had a couple of clients who were worried about keeping it intact with rambunctious kids around. Though this last concern is pretty much unfounded (the tempered glass used for railings needs to meet strict standards), for such clients there are other options. Often, a simple vinyl rail dressed up with black metal balusters works well, because the black color causes the balusters to fade from view (2). Another possibility is a low-profile all-metal railing, which can be given extra character by combining it with a larger, composite rail post (3).

If the clients like low-profile metal rails but want a wider, more-traditional cap rail that can hold a cup (4), either use brackets that attach around the top rail



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Hiding the View

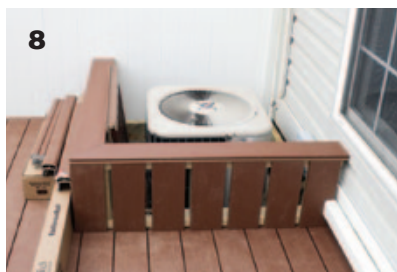


(5) When homeowners want to limit interaction with their neighbors, a solid wall is the answer.

(6) A wall with alternating slats creates a screen that lets the breeze pass through.

(7) A rail-height solid wall offers the homeowners some privacy while still allowing them to enjoy the view.

(8) Verify access requirements before hiding mechanicals.



to connect to the subrail and the newels, or predrill holes through the top rail so a flat cap rail (often a matching deck board) can be fastened from below with short screws. For additional support, drive longer screws through the deck-board cap down into the rail posts.

Hiding the View

But what if your clients are not concerned about viewing nature, or worse, are trapped next to a difficult neighbor and want to enjoy as much privacy as possible? That might call for a custom wall.

When clients don't want to see or hear



the neighbors at all, I'll build a solid privacy wall **(5)**. After framing it, I install decking or fascia boards on one or both sides and cap it with a matching deck board up top. Covering both sides can get pretty pricey, so I often use simpler construction on the side facing the neighbors.

If clients like the idea of a wall but don't want to completely cut off the breeze, a shadow-box-style privacy wall with openings between the slats may be good compromise **(6)**. In that case, since much of the PT framing will be exposed, I often stain the lumber to match the slats (before installing them).

For clients who like the view from their deck but want some privacy from the neighbors when sitting down to eat, try a low solid wall **(7)**. A similar design idea may work to mask objects such as air-conditioning units or utility boxes, but first check to make sure the rail doesn't violate codes regarding access **(8)**.

Multiple Needs

Sometimes clients require several different rail solutions, all blended into a single project. Perhaps they want to see the creek

Lessons From the Field

I've experimented with many different vinyl railings and have learned a few things in the process.

Some manufacturers don't use metal in their lower rails. If you are planning to substitute a bottom-rail piece for the top rail, make sure it does have metal in it — the extra support will keep the rail from pushing out or bowing down.

Carefully consider the brackets you use and any modifications that may need to be made (photo, right). If you want to use a flat cap but the standard brackets extend beyond the rail, you may be forced to shorten the brackets on site. This takes time, occasionally delivers poor results, and can be dangerous. If you do cut the brackets, make sure the rail panels are still well-secured and supported. My current vinyl-railing manu-



Adding cap rails to standard railings may require field-modifying the brackets.

facturer was able to source some “bucket-style” fence brackets instead of brackets that completely surround the railing. Now I don't have to cut brackets on site — which saves time and reduces my liability.

out back but want privacy from the sides — while not eliminating the cross-breeze. In one case, I worked with a local vinyl-railing manufacturer (GreenWay Fence & Railing Supply; greenwayfence.com) to create a standard-height rail using bottom rails in place of the top rails (see “Lessons From the Field,” above). This allowed me to install a flat Azek cap rail around the perimeter of the deck, with some sections filled with standard vinyl balusters and others with vinyl privacy panels (9). The railing thus offers privacy in some places and access to views in others, while still being consistent in design throughout. On a similar job, we built a custom pergola into the rails (10).

Custom railings provide an almost unlimited range of options for solving your customers' design problems and for setting yourself apart from your competition. Don't be afraid to combine different products to achieve the look you're after. A little boldness can make the difference between you and someone else getting the job. ♦

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Multiple Needs



(9) A combination of solid panels and balusters can provide privacy from the neighbors, yet still let your clients look out at their own backyard.

(10) A pergola built into the railing provides broken shade and a high-end look.